

# Iceland – Killer Whales & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

23 – 27 March 2014

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Grundarfjörður

Report & Images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Mike Robinson  
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## Day 1

Sunday 23rd March

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn

Weather details: Wet, wind E4m/s, temp 1<sup>0</sup>C

UK flights touched down at Keflavik on time where Malcolm was waiting in the arrivals hall to take the group on the 20-minute drive to the Northern Light Inn. Thirty minutes later some were blissfully soaking in the geo-thermal waters of the Blue Lagoon, the rest relaxing and recovering from a day of travel in the comfort of the hotel.

Following a delicious Icelandic supper of traditional roast lamb and salmon, Malcolm gave a tour briefing setting out the programme for the next few days. Retiring to the more comfortable lounge, we held a session on camera settings and good practice techniques on how to take better northern light images, should we be lucky! With total cloud-cover limiting any chance of seeing the northern lights tonight we retired full of anticipation of the days ahead.

## Day 2

Monday 24th March

Northern Light Inn – Stykkishólmur

Weather details; Mostly light rain, wind NE 16m/s and temp 4<sup>0</sup>C

We started off along the south coast where ancient lava fields were covered in grey Rhacomitrum moss. From Selfoss we followed the River Sog to its source at Þingvellavatn National Park. Here we had time for a coffee stop on land that exists between the tectonic plates, spewed up in the tension of their coming together. This is new land, the newest on the planet, geologically speaking. We took a short walk in this, perhaps the most iconic landscape in Iceland to the Alþing (the first ever Parliament) before continuing with our journey west to Snæfellsnes.

On arrival at Hvalfjörður, it seemed as if we were about to follow in the footsteps of Jules Verne in his 'classic' novel, 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth'; the 6km long tunnel seemed to disappear deep into the bowels of the earth before reappearing on the north-side of the fjord!

We made a brief stop by the estuary in Borgarnes for lunch then continued through the flat coastal plain before crossing the high mountain pass and descending onto the north coast of Snæfellsnes. We first visited Kolgrafafjörður to see if any Orcas were present. With no sign of any dorsal fins present we continued onto Grundarfjörður, to see if a sailing the following day would be possible, before returning to the bridge by the causeway. We had only been there for 15 minutes when we found a White-winged Scoter and were alerted to presence of Orcas in the inner fjord. With little time to react we assemble on the bridge and watched the five Orcas pass beneath - marvellous!

It was time to continue onto Stykkishólmur and before going to the hotel we visited the small picturesque harbour. Our hotel was located on top of a hill with a stunning view of Breidafjörður Bay stretching out to the north and its many islands. This is an expansive and shallow bay, the largest area of shallow coastal water in Iceland and teeming with rich wildlife. The area has greater tides and tidal currents than elsewhere in the country and its many islands are almost infinite with an estimate at approximately 2,500. Its birdlife is unique and one of the most important in Iceland and the whole of the North Atlantic. This microcosm is characterised by birds which are wholly dependent on marine life, and many of them nest in large colonies. The area holds two-thirds of the Icelandic White-tailed Eagle population and to the north perhaps the world's largest Razorbill colony is found on the Látrajarg bird-cliffs. About one-third of the Common Eiders population breed here in Breiðafjörður.

We had plenty of time to rest and relax after today's long journey before dinner. Following supper the daily-log and briefing and with little chance of the northern lights being visible this evening we retired.

## Day 3

Tuesday 25th March

### Snæfellsnes Peninsula

Weather details; Sunny, winds E 2m/s with temp 4°C

This morning we returned to Grundarfjörður for our Orca sailing. It was a beautiful day the sun shone the scenery was amazing and, perhaps more importantly the sea was calm for the first time in days! It didn't take long to reach an area where many Orcas were present and busy feeding. This was very spectacular, our arrival happened to coincide with the Orca 'carousel' feeding and at one point we appeared to be surrounded by tall black fins! Once they had fed a small group, quite near the ship, they were seen 'logging' sleeping. The feeding frenzy also attracted many seabirds, including Gannets and we had a grandstand view of these magnificent birds plunge-diving.

All too soon the small ship's engines roared into action and we were heading back to the harbour having had a warming cup of hot chocolate and doughnut twist. With a predicted storm brewing and our chances of a repeat sailing tomorrow doubtful, and since the weather looked stable enough to last into the afternoon, Malcolm enquired if there was an opportunity of another sailing later? Word came back, it would be possible! So we lunched in the centre and after, made the short walk to where the ship was moored. It didn't take long to relocate the pod of Orca since they were roughly in the same area.

Although our experience during the earlier sailing would be very difficult to better, we did have some wonderful views. The Orcas were very obliging, frequently approaching very close to the ship, even swimming beneath! With memory cards full, we once more returned to the harbour feeling very lucky to have experienced such a wonderful event.

After dinner this evening the skies remained cloud-covered, but with the aurora strength increasing Malcolm decided we should be pro-active tonight. Checking on various weather information sites it seemed there may be a possibility of finding clear skies on the south coast of Snæfellsnes, so we headed out into the darkness. After driving for an hour we stopped and waited, but sadly any break in the cloud-cover never materialised so we returned to Stykkishólmur.

## Day 4

Wednesday 26th March

### Snæfellsnes Peninsula

Weather details; Storm force winds 16m/s and rain with temp 5°C

Huge waves topped with white-horses were numerous on Breidafjörður this morning as we watched an angry sea from the breakfast room! However, we braved the inclement weather and chanced an interesting journey, albeit slow, to Oláfsvik. We eventually arrived late morning and immediately went to the harbour where we found a pair of Long-tailed Ducks and not much more. So, in spite of strong winds we continued onto Rif, visited the harbour there. We returned back to Oláfsvik for a coffee stop and a comfort break.

On the outskirts of town we stopped in a public viewing area and had some good views of Harlequins before continuing back to Grundarfjörður, stopping en-route for lunch by a valley known to hold Arctic Fox, alas any self-respecting fox would be well and truly hunkered down in this weather! In town we paused by the seawall and had even closer views of Harlequin before checking the harbour.

Mid-afternoon and we were back at Kolgrafafjörður in the hope of seeing Orcas pass beneath the bridge. Although the weather was inclement we waited, checking through the rafts of eiders assembled to see if we could find a 'Kings' or the White-winged Scoter. None of the former were seen, but we enjoyed some reasonable views of the later. After 2-hours and with no evidence of Orca or White-beaked Dolphins present we decided to head back to the hotel. Although the weather didn't bode well for lights this evening, we nevertheless remained optimistic as we disappeared to our rooms to pack in readiness for an early departure the next day.

## Day 5

Thursday 27th March

### Stykkishólmur - Keflavik Airport

Weather details; Strong windy 15m/s, temp 1°C

After breakfast this morning we left Stykkishólmur and started our return journey to Keflavik. A Ptarmigan provided some incredible views as it flew alongside, then in front of the bus. The drive was pleasant and uneventful, that is until we reached the Hvalfjörður Tunnel; the bus started to overheat! Malcolm carefully managed to drive as far as the Icelandic factory outlet shop and while the group indulged in a little retail therapy or did some birdwatching he arranged for a replacement bus to collect us.

In typical Icelandic efficiency we lost little time before we were on the new bus and heading for downtown Reykjavik. Following a brief city tour we were allowed our freedom to roam these cosmopolitan streets before reuniting at the new and very impressive opera house, Harpa by the harbour.

We continued onto Keflavik airport to connect with the UK flight, while Mike and Annie sorted a hire car to continue with their Iceland odyssey and finally I dropped Sue and Richard, who were staying on for an extra night, at their hotel in Keflavik.

We may not have had the best weather, but we really enjoyed a very spectacular ‘double sailing’ with some of the most enigmatic creatures on this planet! I sincerely hope you will return soon to experience more of what Iceland can offer...



White-winged Scoter amongst raft of Eider Ducks

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## Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			23	24	25	26	27
1	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	
2	Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>			50	5	
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		3	10	5	
4	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		150	80	60	
5	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		60	3	1	✓
6	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		20	2	3	✓
7	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		2			
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		6	4	8	✓
9	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		5			✓
10	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓	✓	✓	
11	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		2		19	
12	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>				10	
13	American White-winged Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi deglandi</i>		1		1	
14	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		5	6	8	✓
15	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>				1	
16	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1			
17	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>		1		1	1
18	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		24	30	60	
19	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>		15		90	
20	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			24	15	
21	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
22	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	3
25	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			1		
26	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>			1	5	
27	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					3
28	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	8	10	12	✓
29	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		12	20	24	✓
30	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	40	30			

## Mammals

1	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>		6	30		
3	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>			7		
2	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		1	12	2	
3	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		6	10	9	



Orca